

The University of Chicago

THE CRITICAL DOCTRINE
OF JEAN-FRANÇOIS DE LA HARPE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

1937

By
GRACE MILDRED SPROULL

Private Edition, Distributed by
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1939

The University of Chicago

THE CRITICAL DOCTRINE
OF JEAN-FRANÇOIS DE LA HARPE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

1937

By

GRACE MILDRED SPROULL

Private Edition, Distributed by
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1939



THE CRITICAL DOCTRINE OF JEAN-FRANÇOIS DE LA HARPE

To anyone who dips even casually into the letters, memoirs, and periodicals of the late eighteenth century, it becomes evident that Jean-François de la Harpe was one of the most talked-of authors of his time. The first thirty years of the nineteenth century continued to place him in the front rank of literary authorities. Although his reputation since then has greatly declined, the importance of his critical works in the eyes of his own and the succeeding generation cannot be questioned. In view of this prestige, his critical theories and judgments offer an interesting object of study. In such a study two chief problems present themselves: (1) What is the relation of his literary doctrine to seventeenth-century principles, to neo-classicism as represented by Voltaire, and to pre-Romantic currents? (2) What is his usual critical approach? The second of these two questions has special importance in view of the fact that Brunetière has stated that La Harpe inaugurated historical criticism in France.¹ Throughout the following discussion the attempt will be made to test this statement and to see to what extent it may be accepted.

The writings of La Harpe himself are obviously the most important source of information in attempting to answer these questions.² To his works published in book form have been added the numerous articles which he contributed to the Mercure, the Journal de politique et de littérature, and the Mémorial. In order to determine La Harpe's place in the contemporary scene and to place him against the background of his time, I have consulted the files

¹F. Brunetière, L'Evolution des genres, Vol. I, L'Evolution de la critique (Paris, 1898), p. 164.

²In this study the following abbreviations are used to refer to the chief works of La Harpe:

C.L.--Correspondance littéraire adressée à Son Altesse Impériale, Mgr. Le Grand-Duc, aujourd'hui empereur de Russie, et à M. le Comte André Schowalof (Paris: Migneret, 1804-1807), 6 vols.

L.--Lycée ou Cours de littérature ancienne et moderne (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1821-1822), 16 vols.

OE.--OEuvres accompagnées d'une notice sur sa vie et sur ses ouvrages (Paris: Verdière, 1820-1821), 16 vols.

of thirty-three contemporary periodicals in addition to those just listed. These contain voluminous material concerning La Harpe, dealing in part with his work as a critic.

The Critical Works of La Harpe

During the years 1768-1779 and 1789-1794, La Harpe was a member of the literary staff of the Mercure and contributed over three hundred articles to it, most of them on literary subjects. From 1800 to his death in 1803, he was again associated with the Mercure, but he appears not to have written critical articles at this time. In the years 1776-1778 he edited the Journal de politique et de littérature and wrote the great majority of literary reviews that appeared in it. His numerous articles in the short-lived Mémorial (1797) are chiefly on political rather than on literary subjects.

In 1774 La Harpe, through the influence of Voltaire, secured the position of correspondent of the Grand Duke of Russia, later the Czar Paul I. It was his duty to keep his imperial patron informed of the literary news of Paris. His letters, covering the period from 1774 to 1791 and published in 1801 under the title of Correspondance littéraire, contain much critical material, usually concerning contemporary writers. La Harpe's opinions on literary subjects may also be found in the prefaces of his plays and in some of his poems and Academic éloges.

The most complete expression of his literary doctrine is found, however, in the lectures delivered at the Lycée. This institution, which Sainte-Beuve describes as a sort of elegant Sorbonne for the use of people of fashion, is one of the characteristic phenomena of Parisian society in the years immediately preceding the Revolution.¹ It had its origin in the Musée de Monsieur, founded by the pioneer aeronaut Pilâtre de Rozier for the purpose of interesting the public in physical and mathematical sciences.² At the death of the founder in 1785, the Musée was re-organized and took the name of "Lycée." The scientific preoccupation

¹C. A. Sainte-Beuve, Causeries du lundi (Paris, 1856), V, 117; D. Mornet, Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française (Paris, 1934), pp. 284-88.

²C. Dejob, "De l'établissement connu sous le nom de Lycée," Revue internationale d'enseignement, XVIII (1889), 7.

which had characterized the old Musée was somewhat modified by the addition of two new courses: Garat delivered lectures on history, and La Harpe began a series of leçons on literature which were eventually to be published under the title of Lycée ou Cours de littérature.¹

The Lycée had great success, and the courses of La Harpe were particularly popular.² The audience was drawn largely from the upper classes, since the yearly fee of four louis was comparatively high. La Harpe states that in 1786 there were over six hundred persons enrolled.³ Women were admitted on the same basis as men. La Harpe praises the decorum preserved by these audiences composed of "l'élite de la cour et de la ville": "... la plus grande décence, la plus grande attention règnent dans ces séances ... où les sciences et les lettres paraissent avec un éclat qui rappelle les beaux jours d'Athènes."⁴ It appears that the lectures were read rather than delivered from notes, and in this case La Harpe's talent as a reader was probably of great help to him.⁵ His training in the salons and his ability to adapt his presentation to an audience in which there were many women was doubtless also in his favor. Sainte-Beuve presents a picture of him delivering his lectures with confidence and dignity, surrounded by "l'élite des jeunes dames, des gens d'esprit, et des littérateurs, tout ce qu'il y a de plus brillant à cette florissante époque de Louis XVI."⁶

In 1790 plans were under way for the publication of La Harpe's lectures, but the project was interrupted by the Revolution.⁷ The Lycée ou Cours de littérature did not appear until 1799-1805. In view of La Harpe's conversion to Catholicism in 1794 and his violent, though belated, reaction against the Terror,

¹Ibid., p. 11; Journal de Paris, February 7, 1786.

²Mornet, Origines intellectuelles, p. 384; Sainte-Beuve, Causeries du lundi, V, 108.

³C.L., V, 101.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Année littéraire, I (1770), 148; C. Collé, Journal et Memoires (Paris, 1868), III, 282.

⁶Sainte-Beuve, Causeries du lundi, V, 120.

⁷"Notice historique," Lycée (Paris: Agasse, 1799-1805), Vol. XVI, Part II, p. 839.

the revisions and additions made after that date are particularly confusing. In the following discussion of his critical theories, an attempt has been made to exclude the opinions which seem definitely to belong to the period after his conversion. The following indications have been the chief ones used in determining the period to which the material belongs: (1) information given in the heading of sections of the Lycée concerning the date and occasion on which the lecture was given; (2) footnotes by La Harpe stating the circumstances of the composition of a section or passage; (3) reference to the Revolution in the body of the text; (4) contemporary accounts of the lectures. Since the Parisian periodicals often reported the meetings in detail and summarized the lectures, the last-named indication has been particularly valuable. By these tests it seems reasonably safe to assume that the greater part of the literary ideas expressed in the Lycée as finally published were already formulated at the time of the projected printing in 1790.¹

La Harpe's Theories Concerning Critical Approach

The question raised at the beginning of this study concerning La Harpe's critical approach can be answered only after an examination of the methods actually employed by him in passing judgment on authors and works,² but a preliminary indication may be found in the statements he makes concerning the critic and the nature of criticism.

In the introduction to the Lycée La Harpe attempts to trace the beginnings of criticism. In a few phrases he sketches a primitive state of society in which art was unknown. When the first works of art appeared within this group, as for example the poems of Homer among the Greeks, the initial reaction of the audience was naturally enthusiasm and gratitude. As the number of works increased, the audience, "en n'écoutant que son instinct, en exprimant ses sensations," showed what it liked and what it disliked.³ At this stage there appeared "ces esprits justes et lumineux qui voulaient se rendre compte de leurs jouissances," of whom the greatest example is Aristotle. Artists in turn listened to these enlightened judges so that they might know better how to win

¹One of the most important exceptions is the unfinished section on French philosophy in the eighteenth century.

²Cf. infra, pp. 27-32.

³L., I, 2.

approval. Thus from Aristotle to the present day the critic has had a double function. He acts as a mentor for the public, confirming "l'impression de la multitude quand elle n'écoute que celles de la raison" and correcting it when it goes astray; and he also acts as a guide for the artist.¹

La Harpe recognizes two main types of critics, those who judge simply "le résultat des opérations de l'art" and those who in addition point out the means by which the effect is obtained. In general he gives greater importance to the second type.² Critics in this group need a specialized knowledge which is seldom possessed except by those who are artists in that particular field. The Art poétique of Boileau, for example, shows "que ceux qui peuvent donner des modèles sont aussi ceux qui donnent les meilleures leçons."³ It is only when he is attempting to defend his own position in pronouncing judgment on musical matters that La Harpe tends to minimize the importance of this technical knowledge and to hold that valid comment on the effect of the work of art may be made by "quiconque a des oreilles sensibles et quelque justesse dans l'esprit."⁴

The literary critic, La Harpe holds, should interpret his field in a broad sense and should not exclude from it any writings that contribute to the pleasure of mankind: "... il ne faut dans les arts rien rejeter ni dédaigner de ce qui peut varier les amusements publics, et entrer dans la classe des plaisirs dont les honnêtes gens n'aient point à rougir."⁵ Even the minor genres such as vaudeville and comic opera may be discussed by the critic provided they are given their proper rank. At the other extreme from these light works, history and philosophy should have their place in the study of literature.⁶ La Harpe warns the critic against too great preoccupation with one particular type of merit: "Ne cherchons donc jamais à rabaisser un genre de mérite pour en élever un autre; admettons-les chacun à leur place, et que jamais une préférence ne devienne une exclusion."⁷

¹Ibid., pp. 2-3.

²Ibid., V, 267; VIII, 431; IX, 306. Marmontel demands very high intellectual qualifications for a critic; see Eléments de littérature (Paris, 1867), I, 350-65.

³L., VII, 37.

⁴Ibid., XII, 230.

⁵Ibid., p. 255.

⁶Ibid., III, 176.

⁷Ibid., I, 352.

La Harpe asserts that the critic, in order to perform his duty effectively, must examine not only authors of many different types but also those of different times and countries. In the preface to the first edition of the Lycée La Harpe claims for himself a position as innovator because of the scope of his undertaking: "Mais c'est ici, je crois, la première fois, soit en France, soit même en Europe, qu'on offre au public une histoire raisonnée de tous les arts de l'esprit et de l'imagination, depuis Homère jusqu'à nos jours, qui n'exclut que les sciences exactes et les sciences physiques."¹ This quotation raises a question which is an essential one in this study, namely whether the work of La Harpe, as Brunetière claims, inaugurates historical criticism in France.² As actually carried out, the Lycée will appear much less complete than the author's statement as given above indicates. Yet, if we still limit ourselves to La Harpe's remarks concerning critical approach, we find that elsewhere, in explaining his undertaking, he considerably modifies its scope: "Les cinq siècles qui ont marqué dans l'histoire de l'esprit humain passeront successivement sous nos yeux."³ This quotation shows that while La Harpe considers a chronological approach essential, his conception of literary history is narrow, since he confines himself to the discussion of only five centuries between Homer and the age of Louis XVI.

La Harpe's general statements on the subject show that he believes that the consideration of the relationship between les mœurs and literature has a rightful place in criticism. The "examen des rapports généraux du théâtre avec les mœurs des nations" may be called "la philosophie de la critique."⁴ In order to judge a poem fairly, the critic must transport himself in imagination to the time when the poet lived. La Harpe states that this is universally accepted in theory but that it is difficult to put the precept into practice:

Cette théorie n'est pas contestée: mais la pratique est plus difficile qu'on ne pense. Nous sommes si remplis des idées, des mœurs, des préjugés qui nous entourent, que nous avons une disposition très prompte à rejeter tout ce qui nous paraît s'en éloigner.⁵

¹Lycée (Paris: Agasse, 1799-1805), I, 11.

²Brunetière, Evolution de la critique, pp. 162, 164.

³L., I, 33.

⁴Ibid., XII, 151; cf. II; 176.

⁵Ibid., II, 140-41.

La Harpe warns, however, against the tendency to interpret literary events as necessarily the result of political or social environment. The fact that two things occur at the same time does not show that one is the result of the other. For example the development of philosophy and the decadence of literature are found together in both ancient Rome and modern France, but it is simply a case of one type of superiority following another: "... ce sont deux puissances qui se succèdent, mais dont l'une n'a ni combattu ni détrôné l'autre."¹ Thus it seems, as Faguet points out, that La Harpe, while admitting the effect of les mœurs on literature, believes that the arts have within themselves a certain continuity with elevations and depressions of its own, more or less divorced from contemporary conditions.²

In the opinion of La Harpe, criticism should take as its point of departure concrete works of art rather than general principles: "Ce qui est vraiment instructif, c'est l'examen raisonné de chaque auteur; c'est l'exact résumé des beautés et des défauts, c'est cet emploi continu du jugement et de la sensibilité."³ There are only a few general rules that are universally accepted; the rest are "un composé d'idées mixtes et de nuances délicates, qu'il est très-aisé et très-commun de confondre."⁴ While the critic cannot hope to say anything new in regard to general principles, he may still be able to contribute new and pleasing remarks concerning the "nuances délicates et fugitives" which are the essential characteristic of beauty.⁵

In the examination of literature, La Harpe holds, reason and la sensibilité must work together.⁶ Faguet states that La Harpe occasionally seems to accept the idea that in the presence of the work of art "il faut s'abandonner à son impression."⁷ It

¹Ibid., I, 14; cf. Voltaire, OEuvres, XIV, 552-54.

²E. Faguet, "La Harpe," Revue des cours et conférences, 1904-1905 (1ère série), p. 195; cf. L., V, 85-86.

³L., I, 34; cf. Dejob, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

⁴L., VIII, 112.

⁵Ibid., I, 33; cf. ibid., IX, 343-44.

⁶Ibid., I, 209-13; OE., III, 219-20; cf. supra, pp. 4-5. Marmontel, Eléments de littérature, III, 263-64.

⁷Faguet, "La Harpe," Revue des cours et conférences, 1904-1905 (1ère série), p. 290.

is true that at times, particularly in regard to poetry, La Harpe gives much importance to the immediate sensation produced by the work. In this he seems to be following in the tradition of the sensationalistic school of psychology represented by Condillac and Helvétius.¹ There is room in criticism, he states, for individual variations of taste:

... c'est que chacun voit avec ses yeux, et sent avec ses organes. Tel tableau est plus ou moins beau, selon l'oeil qui le regarde; telle pièce plus ou moins belle, selon les connaissances et le caractère de ceux qui l'entendent.²

La Harpe declares that his criticism in the Lycée is addressed "à l'imagination et au coeur autant qu'à l'esprit et au goût."³ For this reason oral presentation before a group is particularly to his advantage: "Les sensations sont plus vives quand elles ne sont pas solitaires; elles sont plus sûres quand elles paraissent confirmées par tout ce qui nous environne; ce qu'on a senti en commun laisse une trace plus profonde."⁴

The above quotations suggest that La Harpe believes that it is one of the duties of the critic to communicate to his audience the pleasure he finds in a work of art. To attain this aim it is essential that more attention be given to beauties than to defects. This La Harpe claims to have done. He states that he has given ten times more space to "la connaissance approfondie de la perfection" than to "la censure du médiocre et du mauvais."⁵ This phrase seems to anticipate the statement of Chateaubriand concerning the necessity of subordinating "la petite et facile critique des défauts" to "la grande et difficile critique des beautés."⁶ In a Mercure article La Harpe states that the critic of contemporary authors should either seek out that which is least bad in mediocre works or keep silent concerning them:

Peut-être y a-t-il deux bonnes pages dans un volume; tâchez de les trouver, et citez-les sans parler du reste. Si rien n'est digne des regards du lecteur, alors n'en parlez pas, à moins que ce ne soit une matière à des réflexions utiles au goût.

¹Cf. Helvétius, Oeuvres complètes (London, 1781), IV, 68: "... la beauté d'un ouvrage a pour mesure la sensation qu'il fait sur nous."

²L., I, 26; cf. ibid., pp. 401-2.

³Ibid., IV, 68.

⁴Ibid., III, 25.

⁵Ibid., XII, 304.

⁶Chateaubriand, "Sur les Annales littéraires de M. Dus-sault," Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Krabbe, 1852-1853), I, 259.

Mais en général, toutes les fois qu'il n'y a rien à louer, le meilleur est de garder le silence.¹

One also finds, however, passages in the works of La Harpe which maintain that frankness and the free expression of opinion are essentials in criticism.² In discussing a work one should not be hampered by exaggerated concern for the amour-propre of the author: "L'auteur a donné son ouvrage, et je donne mon avis, chacun de nous a ses risques et fortunes: tout est égal. Le public est juge" ³ One does not destroy the merit of a work by pointing out its defects; the only criticism that really condemns an artistic production is one that shows "l'absence des beautés."⁴ La Harpe states as a principle of criticism that an author should be judged on the basis of his best work: "L'exacte justice consiste à juger toujours un écrivain par ce qu'il a de meilleur; c'est une méthode qui nous avons constamment suivie, et un exemple qui a été rarement imité."⁵

The scattered remarks of La Harpe which have been brought together here indicate he held, in theory, that criticism should be based upon a somewhat modified historical approach, that the concrete work rather than the abstract principle should be the point of departure, that feeling has a place by the side of reason as a judge of literature, and that beauties rather than defects should be emphasized.

Criteria for Literature as a Whole

The position of La Harpe in regard to the nature and basis of the general rules of literature is essentially the same as that taken by Voltaire.⁶ The latter states: "Les principes de tous les arts qui dépendent de l'imagination sont tous aisés et simples, tous puisés dans la nature et dans la raison."⁷ In the development of civilization, La Harpe holds, great works of literature preceded

¹Mercure, June, 1772, p. 138.

²L., V, 300-301; VII, 32-34.

³Ibid., VII, 34.

⁴Ibid., I, 214.

⁵Ibid., XIII, 369; cf. ibid., XI, 144.

⁶Cf. F. Brunetière, Histoire de la littérature française classique (Paris, 1904-1917), III, 603.

⁷Voltaire, Œuvres complètes, edited by Moland (Paris, 1877-1885), II, 48. Hereafter this edition will be referred to as Œuvres.

the formulation of the rules. It was by examining and comparing these works that critics were able to discover certain general principles that could act as guides for future authors. What is called the art of writing is thus the product of reason and experience.¹ The rules are aids for writers rather than absolute standards by which works of art are to be judged. They are worthy of respect because they have been accepted "par la raison de tous les siècles, et par le suffrage de tous les hommes éclairés."²

The true critic, in the opinion of La Harpe, will not apply these rules too rigorously and will not show "un entêtement aveugle et superstitieux qui veut tout assujettir [sic] aux mêmes règles."³ Reason, which has dictated the precepts of art, knows that it cannot foresee all the eventualities that may arise. The first principle of literature is to please, and reason demands that the writer adapt his means to this end: "... c'est l'art qui prescrit au talent de proportionner l'application des règles à ce premier dessein; d'en mesurer l'importance et de sacrifier ce qui en a le moins à ce qui en a le plus."⁴ La Harpe states that it is a particular mania of his day to speak of the tyranny of the rules. This is foolish, he holds, since they are not arbitrary conventions imposed from without but "des aperçus de la raison confirmés par l'expérience."⁵ In all countries and in all periods the authors who have written well have followed "la nature, la vraisemblance et la raison, qui sont les fondements de toutes les règles."⁶

La Harpe repeatedly states, as in the above quotation, that the arts must follow nature. In general he considers that literature is one of the "arts d'imitation" and that nature is the model which should be imitated. All objects, however, are not equally worthy of the artist's attention. Those depicted in works of art should be carefully selected and should gain added beauty through their presentation: "Dans la peinture même, dont le

¹L., III, 32; cf. Marmontel, Eléments de littérature, III, 262.

²L., VII, 39.

³Ibid., III, 35; cf. Voltaire, OEuvres, VIII, 308.

⁴L., VII, 85.

⁵Ibid., p. 83.

⁶Ibid., III, 32; cf. R. Bray, La Formation de la doctrine classique en France (Paris, 1927), pp. 121-39.

principal objet est l'imitation matérielle, il y a un choix à faire, et bien des choses ne seraient bonnes à peindre; à plus fort raison, dans la poésie, qui doit sur-tout imiter avec choix, et embellir en imitant."¹ In this opinion La Harpe is in line with general neo-classical doctrine.² Diderot, he holds, has contributed to the decadence of French literature by advocating the imitation of "la nature brute et sauvage."³

The aim of the writer, La Harpe believes, should most often be a faithful depiction of human thoughts and emotions. A work of art may be tested by comparing it with "la nature dont il est l'image."⁴ Our enjoyment comes largely from the resemblance we see between the objects represented and those we already have in our minds. This is particularly true of the theatre where the greatest pleasure of the spectators is "de se retrouver dans ce qu'ils voient."⁵

La Harpe holds that external nature may also be an object of imitation, but it should be combined with an appeal to human sentiment. The reader is pleased with the depiction of mountains, woods, and streams because it recalls to him past emotions or a sense of the peace he has lost, rather than because it represents the minute details of a landscape.⁶

Nature is fundamentally the same in all times and places. Beauty, which is its image, is thus also universal: "... le beau est le même dans tous les temps, parce que la nature et la raison ne sauraient changer."⁷ Certain literary principles are universally accepted because they are "essentiellement conformes au bon sens, qui est le même dans tous les temps et dans tous les lieux."⁸ The most important test for works of art is that of time, which shows that their interest is based not on passing fashions but on truth and beauty which are permanent.⁹

¹L., I, 53; cf. ibid., V, 432.

²F. Brunetière, Histoire de la littérature classique, II, 580-83; R. Bray, op. cit., pp. 140-58.

³C.L., I, 192.

⁴L., V, 367; cf. Helvétius, Oeuvres, IV, 233.

⁵OE., IV, 124; L., I, 56.

⁶OE., III, 316-33.

⁷L., I, 33.

⁸C.L., IV, 9; cf. L., IX, 8.

⁹L., XIII, 422.

This universality is modified by two factors, the personality of the author and the customs of the time in which he writes. The rules of taste may be everywhere the same, but "chacun les applique suivant son caractère et ses moyens."¹ In comparing ancient and modern literature, La Harpe notes some of the changes that different conditions have brought about: "Les différences dans les mœurs, dans la religion, dans le gouvernement, dans la langue, ont dû nécessairement en amener aussi dans les arts que nous avons imités, et qui ont pris sous nos mains de nouvelles formes."² Even some of our emotions may seem to be different from those of the ancients, but this is true only of the externals: "... c'est une superficie qui varie suivant les lieux; mais le fonds est dans le coeur humain, qui est le même partout..."³

On the basis of the universality of human emotions, an author may depict the probable in such a way as to create a sort of illusion in the mind of the reader or spectator. This illusion is not produced by the exact reproduction of nature but by an art of selection and combination:

En effet, à quoi tient cette agréable illusion que l'art produit sur nous quand il est à sa perfection ... ? N'est-ce pas à ce tout artificiel dont les parties bien liées, bien assorties, nous présentent, non pas la nature réelle (elle est toujours près de nous, et nous n'avons pas besoin des arts pour la trouver) mais une nature assez vraisemblable pour ne contredire en rien la réalité, et assez embellie pour être fort au-dessus de la nature ordinaire.⁴

This illusion, based upon la vraisemblance, is never complete. If it were, we should lose one of the chief pleasures which a work of art is capable of giving, "cette surprise agréable qui naît des efforts du génie, ce souvenir qui nous avertit au milieu du spectacle que ce n'est qu'une illusion bien préparée."⁵ We experience not only the pleasure which comes from the emotions directly aroused but also admiration for the skill of the artist who has overcome the difficulty involved in creating the illusion.

From what has been said concerning La Harpe's conception

¹Ibid., III, 422.

²Ibid., II, 136; cf. Voltaire, OEuvres, VIII, 312.

³L., VI, 123; cf. ibid., pp. 90-95. ⁴Ibid., V, 187.

⁵Ibid.; cf. Marmontel, Eléments de littérature, II, 256-57. On the difficulté vaincue see the preface to Voltaire's OEdipe (OEuvres, II, 57).

of "une nature choisie" as the object of imitation, one expects him to place great stress upon les bienséances. Indeed this is one of the chief tests which he applies to both subject matter and style. Marmontel makes a distinction between les convenances, which take into account "les usages, les mœurs du temps et du lieu de l'action," and les bienséances which relate to "l'opinion et les mœurs du pays et du siècle où l'action est représentée."¹ La Harpe does not seem to recognize this difference and gives to both the words the meaning which Marmontel restricts to les bienséances.² Good taste demands that the author should not shock his readers by violation of the accepted standards of propriety as to either subject or style. These standards vary according to countries and periods and are largely dependent upon social conditions, particularly on the position held by women.³ It may be noted that in thus admitting an element of relativity in the rules governing la bienséance La Harpe gives additional evidence of the historical approach discussed above.⁴

Although La Harpe accepts the Horatian principle that the double purpose of art is to please and to instruct, a number of his statements concerning the ethical aim of literature are in negative terms. It is one of the first rules of the art that a work "ne doit jamais blesser la morale ni consacrer la révolte et le crime."⁵ This rule is based on practical considerations as well as on ethical ones, La Harpe holds; a play, for example, would alienate the audience and defeat its own purpose if it praised "de mauvais principes ou de mauvais exemples."⁶ Men possess an inborn sense of justice which would not allow them to be pleased by such a work: "... les hommes assemblés ne supporteraient nulle part l'apologie du crime."⁷ Thus the moral character of literature has its source, at least in part, in the desire of the author to please his audience.

It is rather difficult to determine to what extent La Harpe believes that imaginative literature should be judged on the basis

¹Marmontel, Eléments de littérature, I, 221.

²L., II, 101, 103; V, 316; VI, 115; XII, 149.

³Ibid., II, 101-2; cf. Voltaire, Œuvres, II, 552-53; VI, 270.

⁴Cf. supra, pp. 6-7.

⁵L., VI, 24.

⁶C.L., IV, 80.

⁷L., IX, 63.

of its contribution to the cause of la philosophie. On the whole he seems to maintain that literary works should be considered with relation to aesthetic standards rather than utilitarian ones. He protests vigorously, however, against the idea that philosophy harms the fine arts: "... il est impossible que la philosophie, qui n'est que l'étude du vrai, nuise aux beaux-arts, qui sont l'imitation du vrai."¹ Studies directed by reason help enlighten works of imagination, and some of the most eloquent poems develop philosophical ideas.²

Most of these principles advanced by La Harpe, truth to la belle nature, universality, la vraisemblance, propriety in subject matter and style, and respect for the moral sense of the public, are in accord with seventeenth-century doctrine.³ The modifications they show, such as certain concessions to relativity in regard to la bienséance and acceptance of the spirit of la philosophie in literature are neo-classical in that they follow paths already laid out by Voltaire. Indeed as regards the rôle of literature as a means of social progress, the disciple appears to go less far than the master.

Character of the "Grands Genres"

In an age characterized by strong currents toward "le mélange des genres" La Harpe maintains the position that although the realm of literature is broad and many different forms may be admitted, yet each genre should strive only for the effects that it is best fitted to give and should not confuse its aims and means with those of other types. The desire to combine different kinds of emotions in a single work is held to be one of the defects of eighteenth-century taste:

Atteints de la maladie des gens rassiés, nous voudrions rassembler tous les tableaux dans un même cadre, tous les plaisirs dans un spectacle ... On ne songe pas assez qu'il faudrait prendre garde de ne pas user à la fois toutes les sensations et toutes les jouissances, ménager les ressources afin de les perpétuer, admettre chaque genre à sa place, n'en dénaturer aucun et ne pas les confondre tous ...⁴

¹Ibid., I, 9.

²Ibid., p. 10. Brunetière states that La Harpe stresses the element of la philosophie in tragedy (Histoire de la littérature française classique, III, 549).

³Cf. Bray, op. cit., pp. 355-65.

⁴L., I, 401.

This does not mean that the different forms cannot occasionally borrow from one another. On the contrary "tous les genres se touchent par quelque endroit, tous peuvent s'enrichir les uns des autres."¹ This borrowing, however, must be done with skill and tact; otherwise the genres will lose the beauty and interest which rightfully belongs to them individually and the result will be "de les confondre et de les amalgamer de manière que tout soit hors de sa place, et par conséquent de peu d'effet."²

Tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry are for La Harpe, as for Aristotle and Boileau, the three genres which are most clearly defined and have the strongest life of their own. La Harpe follows Aristotle in assigning to tragedy a position superior to that of the epic.³ Tragedy owes this position to the fact that it is able to combine the highest elements of the other forms:

Et pourquoi voyons-nous l'auguste Melpomène
Au sommet d'Hélicon s'asseoir en souveraine?
Ah! c'est que tous les dons partagés à ses soeurs,
Accumulés sur elle, en ont plus de douceurs;
Que son art, rapprochant tous les arts qu'on adore,
A réuni leurs droits pour les étendre encore.⁴

La Harpe agrees with Aristotle that the plot is the most important element in tragedy.⁵ The most essential trait for the dramatist is the ability to develop an action according to the principles of logical continuity, "de contre-balancer par des forces à peu près égales les principaux moyens de l'action, en sorte que l'équilibre subsiste jusqu'à ce que le cours des événements fasse un poids qui entraîne et précipite le dénouement."⁶ The rule that the dénouement must grow logically out of the preceding action is one for which La Harpe, in theory, recognizes no exception.⁷ The subjects of tragedy may be drawn from history, mythology, or the imagination of the artist. Of these La Harpe prefers the latter two. Subjects drawn from the imagination are the special field of modern writers, to whom the way has been shown by Voltaire.⁸ The domain of tragedy is broad, and it is the task of the dramatist to show the beauty of unexplored subjects:

Et qu'on ne dise pas que tout est à peu près épuisé: c'est
le langage de la faiblesse et de l'envie. Non: le champ des
beaux-arts est immense; il n'a d'autres bornes que celles de

¹Ibid., XV, 324.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., I, 58.

⁴OE., III, 327.

⁵L., I, 70.

⁶Ibid., IX, 94.

⁷Ibid., I, 81.

⁸Ibid., IX, 295-97.

la nature et de l'imagination, et qui osera les marquer? ... Le monde entier est ouvert à la tragédie, et on n'a pas encore été par-tout.¹

La Harpe considers that the rule of unity of action is founded upon a knowledge of human nature. The length of the play and the number of incidents must be limited since the audience is capable of only a certain degree of attention: "... c'est que plus l'esprit est occupé, moins le coeur est ému. Le temps est précieux au théâtre: quand il en faut pour l'attention, il n'y en a pas assez pour l'intérêt."² La Harpe quotes Voltaire as having said to him, "L'unité, mon enfant, l'unité: c'est le grand chemin, c'est celui qui va au but."³ There must be, however, progression within this unity, and the interest must be increased from act to act by new fears and new misfortunes.⁴

The unities of time and place are of only secondary importance, in the opinion of La Harpe, since they are "deux choses qui ne feront jamais le sort d'un ouvrage."⁵ In general it is well to observe them as an aid toward la vraisemblance, but they should not be interpreted too narrowly. In his tragedy of Coriolan La Harpe gives a broad interpretation to the unity of place by having part of the action occur in Rome and part in the camp outside the city walls. In the preface to the play he justifies this freedom on the grounds that without it the subject could not be treated and that he has preserved the spirit of the rules: "La proximité des lieux sauve la vraisemblance, qui est le fondement de toute règle; et sans cette extension raisonnable donnée à la loi, il aurait fallu se priver de plus d'un sujet très-heureux."⁶ Gaiffe points out that in regard to the unities there was little difference in the late eighteenth century between those who called themselves reformers and those, such as La Harpe, who claimed to

¹Ibid., VI, 127; cf. ibid., I, 71.

²Ibid., V, 283; cf. ibid., I, 68; cf. La Motte, OEuvres (Paris, 1754), IV, 37-47.

³L., X, 10; cf. Voltaire, OEuvres, II, 48: "... l'esprit humain ne peut embrasser plusieurs objets à la fois; c'est que l'intérêt qui se partage s'anéantit bientôt." This is in the Aristotelian tradition (Poetics, vii. 4, 5).

⁴L., VI, 194; OE., II, 460.

⁵L., V, 311; cf. ibid., I, 59.

⁶OE., II, 463; cf. ibid., p. 527.

be in general defenders of the rules.¹

La Harpe repeatedly refers to pity and fear as the two emotions which tragedy should arouse in the spectator, but he has difficulty in explaining the nature of Aristotelian catharsis. He discusses three possible interpretations of the statement that tragedy "through pity and fear" effects "the proper purgation of these emotions."² He refuses to accept the explanation that our pity and fear purge us of any tendency we may have toward the dangerous passions which cause the downfall of the tragic hero. La Harpe holds that this interpretation goes against the actual wording of the passage and that it is the result of the preoccupation of the seventeenth century with moral problems.³

The explanation offered by La Harpe in his Essai sur les Tragiques grecs, published in 1778, is approximately the same as that given by the Père Brumoy, who holds that tragedy cures the spectators of pity and fear, which are in their nature harmful.⁴ In examining the tragedy of the ancients La Harpe sees a certain justification of this explanation, based on the fact that the Greeks believed in a fate which sent unavoidable misfortunes upon men: "D'après ce principe le spectacle des malheurs de la condition humaine étalé sur la scène a pu paraître à ces peuples une leçon qui les avertissait de s'armer de courage et de patience et de repousser également et la crainte qui glace l'ame, et cette faiblesse plaintive qui l'amollit."⁵ La Harpe, however, differs from Brumoy in maintaining that in the modern world pity, far from being a dangerous emotion, is of the greatest social utility and the source of many virtues. If Aristotelian catharsis is interpreted to mean that it is one of the purposes of tragedy to lessen the power of this emotion, then La Harpe holds that the principle is not applicable to modern tragedy.⁶

¹F. Gaiffe, Le Drame en France au XVIII^e siècle (Paris, 1910), pp. 442-43. Contemporaries expressed surprise that La Harpe, "ami des règles," should take these liberties (Journal de Paris, March 26, 1784; Année littéraire, II [1784], 189-90).

²Aristotle, Poetics. vi. 2 (Butcher translation).

³L., I, 64; cf. Corneille, "Premier discours sur le poème dramatique."

⁴L., I, 290-92; cf. Brumoy, Le Théâtre des Grecs (1730).

⁵La Harpe, OEuvres (Paris: Pissot, 1778), I, 267.

⁶Ibid., p. 268; cf. L., I, 290-95.

La Harpe states that the interpretation of catharsis which he finally adopts came to him through the works of the Abbé Batteux.¹ According to this theory artistic presentation purges pity and fear of the painful elements which they have in real life: "Il [Aristotle] veut dire, comme on l'a très-bien montré de nos jours, que l'objet de toute imitation théâtrale, au moment même où elle excite la pitié et la terreur en nous montrant des actions feintes, est d'adoucir en nous ce que cette pitié et cette terreur auraient de trop pénible, si les actions que l'on nous représente étaient réelles."² Artistic imitation is thus able to transform into pleasure what would elsewhere be pain.

La Harpe follows Aristotle in holding that the tragic hero should not be perfect but should possess some defect. In moral philosophy great deeds performed from pure motives are the best, but on the stage actions are more moving if they have their source in the passions.³ Coriolanus is considered a good example of the tragic hero since to his many virtues he adds a defect which is closely connected with them, a too great confidence in his own powers:

Mais ici ce qui rend un caractère blâmable en morale et en politique, est aussi (suivant l'idée juste et profonde d'Aristote, si souvent confirmée par l'expérience) ce qui le rend plus théâtral. De pareils hommes sont toujours près de ces passions extrêmes qui sont l'ame de la tragédie.⁴

With this type of character it is possible to arouse pity by depicting a change from good fortune to bad without violating the spectators' sense of justice. La Harpe holds that in general Aristotle's decision that an unhappy dénouement is preferable may be accepted, but that it is also permissible to use endings in which the misfortune which has threatened is turned aside.⁵ If an unhappy ending is used the author should take care to soften the effect "par un choix bien entendu de l'espèce de maux et de douleurs où se mêle toujours quelque sentiment qui en adoucit l'amertume."⁶ In this statement one may see the softening effect of eighteenth-century sensibilité upon the theory of tragedy.⁷

¹L., I, 66; cf. C. Batteux, Principes de la littérature (Lyons, 1832), III, 74-78. The work of Batteux first appeared in 1753.

²L., I, 65.

³Ibid., p. 79.

⁴OE., II, 458.

⁵L., I, 81.

⁶Ibid., IX, 341.

⁷This is already marked in the plays of Voltaire. Cf.

La Harpe believes that verse creates for tragedy its greatest difficulty and its greatest beauty.¹ Tragic style demands that the author combine the naturalness needed to create illusion with the dignity and beauty which belong to harmonious verse: "... il faut que ce langage élégant et cadencé conserve assez de vérité pour que l'ame et le coeur soient dans une illusion continuelle, ne croient jamais entendre que le personnage lui-même, et jouissent de la poésie sans qu'elle le fasse oublier."² In reality the character would never have expressed his emotions so well, and thus the author is copying the ideal rather than things as they are, but "tout ce qu'il [le personnage] dit, il aurait pu le dire ainsi, si l'on parlait en beaux vers; et l'idéal n'est pas faux."³ In each language there is a recognized grand vers which is used in tragedies and epics. This verse form is "une sorte de donnée, un langage de convention qui, une fois établi, n'étonne guère plus que le langage ordinaire."⁴ One of the chief merits of the great tragic authors is that they have been able to combine "toute la noblesse du langage de la poésie et toute la vérité des sentiments de la nature."⁵

Comedy, in the opinion of La Harpe, is definitely a lower form than tragedy and demands a lesser degree of talent: "Le noble en tout genre sera toujours plus difficile que le familier."⁶ He presents a definition of comedy based upon Aristotle; it is "une imitation du mauvais, non du mauvais pris dans toute son étendue, mais de celui qui cause la honte et produit le ridicule."⁷ Comic writers fail when they attempt to substitute odious characters for ridiculous ones. The field of comedy is as definitely marked out as is that of tragedy, and the limits in each case are determined by the type of emotion the genre should produce:

Il est aussi expressément recommandé à la comédie de réjouir qu'à la tragédie d'affliger. Ainsi l'une satisfait le désir malin que nous avons de nous moquer même de notre ressemblance; l'autre le besoin que nous avons d'être émus.⁸

Brunetière, Histoire de la littérature française classique, III, 146-48; P. Trahard, Les Maîtres de la sensibilité française au XVIII^e siècle (Paris [1931-1932]), I, 237-59.

¹L., I, 342; C.L., V, 317.

²L., XI, 299.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., VI, 417-18.

⁵Ibid., XI, 297-98.

⁶C.L., II, 25.

⁷L., I, 63.

⁸Ibid., XI, 296.

If comedy restricts itself to the depiction of types, its field is narrow, and after a great artist such as Molière little remains to be done.¹ There are, however, three other great resources for the comic writer, "l'intrigue, les mœurs et la gaieté."² Of these the depiction of les mœurs offers the greatest opportunity to the aspiring writer. Criticism of social custom is the particular domain of comedy,³ but the comédie de mœurs has a disadvantage in that it may lose its interest as customs change. The author can avoid this only if he is able to show, together with the modes of his day, that which is universal in man, "ce qui dans l'homme ne change jamais, ce qui tient à la nature, et non pas seulement aux mœurs."⁴ The field of social customs cannot be easily exhausted, since it allows the author "de rajeunir le portrait en suivant les variations du modèle, et de renouveler ainsi cette partie de l'art qui est sujette à vieillir."⁵

The epic is defined by La Harpe as "le récit en vers d'une action vraisemblable, héroïque et intéressante."⁶ Historical truth is not necessary in the epic, but the author must conserve "la vraisemblance morale." The epic should be confined to heroic subjects since this was its original character and nothing is to be gained by lowering a genre.⁷ La Harpe considers Aristotle's statement that an epic may be written either in verse or in prose and decides that it does not apply to French works.⁸ Verse, as a difficulté vaincue, gives an added charm. If the barriers were lifted and the epic in prose admitted, the result would be the encouragement of mediocrity.⁹

La Harpe holds there are fewer well established rules for the epic than for tragedy because there are fewer models from which to draw them.¹⁰ A rule which applies to both and which he considers founded upon nature and common sense is that of unity of action.¹¹ The recital of the complete life of a hero cannot constitute an epic poem, since it does not imply any invention on the part of the poet and is simply history written in verse. There

¹Ibid., p. 297.

²Ibid., p. 307.

³Ibid., II, 16.

⁴Ibid., XI, 309; cf. supra, pp. 11-12.

⁵L., XI, 310.

⁶Ibid., I, 174-75; cf. ibid., V, 134.

⁷Ibid., I, 175.

⁸Ibid., p. 60.

⁹Ibid., p. 181.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 173; cf. supra, pp. 9-10.

¹¹L., I, 176.

can be no specific rule to regulate the duration of time in an epic. The guiding principle should be that of Aristotle, "de ne point offrir à l'esprit plus qu'il ne peut embrasser."¹ The time may be more or less than a year according to "les besoins et les convenances."

An important question which La Harpe discusses in regard to the epic is the use of le merveilleux.² He sees in the épopée of the ancients a double character: it is both heroic and religious. Among the moderns the epic has lost most of its religious character and has retained chiefly the heroic:

Mais comme les dieux des anciens ne sont plus les nôtres, elle [l'épopée] n'a dû conserver pour nous qu'un de ces deux caractères. Je la crois donc essentiellement héroïque; mais je ne crois pas qu'on soit encore obligé d'y faire entrer la religion.³

La Harpe holds that Voltaire was justified in not using the miraculous in the Henriade since the subject did not have the "éloignement des temps et des lieux" which makes such fictions acceptable.⁴

The marvelous still possesses, however, a charm for modern man, and because of its universal appeal it should be used whenever the subject permits.⁵ The ancients were fortunate in that their religion was eminently poetic, but their mythology cannot be used in modern subjects. The Christian religion, "aussi sublime que vraie" does not offer to the poet "la même variété de fictions,"⁶ but in spite of this La Harpe, in opposition to Boileau, holds that it is at times possible to use le merveilleux chrétien. He advances as proof of this the successful use by Tasso of "les agents intermédiaires admis dans notre religion."⁷

The preceding summary of La Harpe's opinions concerning the nature of tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry, shows that while he follows in general the character of the grands genres as established in the seventeenth century, he also reflects some of the modifications the genres were undergoing in his own day. Although

¹Ibid., p. 180.

²R. C. Williams, The Merveilleux in the Epic (Paris, 1925), pp. 92-119.

³L., I, 174.

⁴Ibid., V, 133; cf. C.L., I, 239.

⁵L., I, 181.

⁶Ibid., p. 185.

⁷Ibid., p. 182. He is less complimentary toward Milton (L., XIV, 376-81).

he calls himself a friend of the rules, he allows considerable freedom in the interpretation of the unities of time and place and holds that tragedy should seek out new fields.¹ He recognizes the fact that writers of comedy must make use of the depiction of les mœurs and not confine themselves to the worn-out field of types. In his discussion of the epic, La Harpe allows greater freedom in the use of the Christian marvelous than do most of his contemporaries, and he thus, in a sense, looks forward to the age of Chateaubriand. It may be noted, however, that in regard to the mélange des genres, he on the whole maintains the older tradition in the face of the tendencies of his own day. The distinction between literary types remains one of the essential elements of his criticism.

Traits of the Writer

Genius, imagination, enthusiasm, taste, and sensibility are words that reappear with great frequency in the literary discussions of the second half of the eighteenth century. They reflect a growing interest in the mind and personality behind the work of art. It is a tendency which La Harpe at times deprecates but which, nevertheless, has an effect upon his works.

La Harpe attempts to define the word génie by tracing its etymology and history. He states that it is only in the eighteenth century that it has been used without a modifier to indicate the highest degree of talent or has been personified to designate a man possessing such talent.² In thus tracing the word La Harpe is following a process already used by Voltaire, who arrives at the same current definition of le génie: "Nous avons dit que le génie particulier d'un homme dans les arts n'est autre chose que son talent; mais on ne donne ce nom qu'à un talent très-supérieur."³

This use of the word génie is accepted by La Harpe since it is current and "l'on doit parler la langue de tout le monde." He insists, however, that it be understood to mean simply "la supériorité d'esprit et de talent" and not to imply a mysterious power of creation or invention with which some authors are endowed

¹La Harpe cites Voltaire's Alzire as a tragedy which makes use of a new world that has been opened to the modern poet (L., I, 71).

²L., I, 21-23.

³Voltaire, OEuvres, XIX, 245-46.

and which others lack.¹ True genius does not disregard the works of the past nor does it disdain to follow in the steps of others.² It is the privilege of superior minds to appropriate suitable material wherever they may find it. Borrowing from preceding authors can be successfully carried on only by "des hommes déjà fort riches de leurs propres fonds, et capables d'améliorer celui d'autrui."³ It is therefore unjust to hold that because an author makes use of the works of others he is lacking in genius, as certain persons try to prove in regard to Racine and Voltaire.⁴ Only men of genius are capable of transporting beauties from one language to another.⁵

La Harpe combats the idea, popular in his day, that genius is by its very nature uneven and that its productions will necessarily be marked by striking defects as well as by great beauties.⁶ His own preference is for authors who have maintained a consistent high level in their works.⁷ In this attitude La Harpe is in accord with Voltaire who, although at times he seems to grant to genius the privilege of irregularity, holds that "le génie conduit par le goût ne fera jamais de faute grossière."⁸

Even in imitating other writers, the man of genius will give to his work the particular mark of his own individual talent: "Tout homme supérieur reçoit de la nature un caractère d'esprit plus ou moins marqué, et c'est dans ce caractère qu'il faut d'abord chercher celui de ses ouvrages."⁹ The general spirit of the age and les moeurs publiques have some influence upon the works produced, but the individual stamp of the author is always discernible. The man of genius has more influence upon his environment than it has upon him: "... les grands écrivains agissent beaucoup plus sur leur siècle que leur siècle n'agit sur eux, et lui donnent

¹L., I, 19-25.

²Ibid., pp. 322-23; III, 412-15; VI, 90.

³Ibid., V, 241.

⁴Ibid., p. 240.

⁵OE., IV, 179.

⁶L., I, 7; VII, 296; cf. D. F. Bond, "Theories of Imagination in 17th and 18th Century English Literary Criticism" (Unpublished Doctor's thesis, Department of English, University of Chicago, 1934), p. 141.

⁷OE., IV, 168.

⁸Voltaire, OEuvres, XIX, 246; cf. VIII, 318; XIV, 548.

⁹L., VI, 85-86.

beaucoup plus qu'ils n'en reçoivent."¹

Imagination, according to La Harpe, is a faculty essential to the poet. He holds, however, that certain of his contemporaries misinterpret the term when they consider imagination in the fine arts to be a sort of creation. He claims Locke as his authority when he defines imagination as merely the power of reproducing and combining sense impressions: "... ce n'est pas qu'il soit donné à l'homme d'inventer une seule idée proprement dite, puisque toute idée n'est originairement en lui que la perception ou le rapport des objets aperçus, et que par conséquent il les reçoit toutes et n'en peut faire aucune."² La Harpe, in stressing the reproductive side of the imagination, is in the tradition of the sensationalistic philosophy of Hobbes and Locke current in England in the early part of the eighteenth century and represented in France by Condillac and Helvétius.³

For La Harpe, however, imagination is something more than mere reproduction since it may compare and combine perceptions and thus produce "des résultats qui soient ou qui paraissent nouveaux."⁴ In a philosophical sense all men have imagination since all men possess memory, but in the arts a more specialized meaning is given to the term: "... on appelle imagination par excellence la facilité d'assembler des images dans le style; et dans les arts d'imitation, le talent de trouver des combinaisons nouvelles qui produisent des effets heureux."⁵ Thus La Harpe, while he rejected the idea of "creative imagination," was in accord with the contemporary movement which tended to give increasing importance to the faculty of combining and comparing perceptions.⁶

La Harpe holds that l'enthousiasme, like génie, création, and imagination, is a term his contemporaries often misuse. A poet should possess a certain type of enthusiasm but not that which is opposed to good sense: "... l'enthousiasme poétique et le bon sens ne sont pas deux contraires; ce sont deux attributs

¹Ibid.; cf. supra, p. 7.

²L., XV, 152; cf. Batteux, op. cit., I, 14-15.

³Bond, "Theories of Imagination," p. 92; cf. Helvétius, Oeuvres, IV, 233, 263.

⁴L., XV, 152.

⁵Ibid., p. 153.

⁶Bond, "Theories of Imagination," pp. 99-118.

de différente espèce, qui s'allient parfaitement, mais dans celui-là seul qui est assez heureusement né pour les réunir; et cette réunion est même tellement indispensable, que sans elle il n'y a point de vrai talent."¹ The enthusiasm which produces the beau désordre of the ode must not be confused with la déraison. The exaltation which Diderot recommends in poets is particularly offensive to La Harpe, who remarks that it is merely the first degree of madness and that "la folie n'est bonne à rien."²

Taste is defined by La Harpe as the "connaissance du beau et du vrai" and the "sentiment des convenances."³ The word is misused when one attempts to separate it from genius and talent "dont il est cependant une partie essentielle et nécessaire." The relation of taste to genius is the same as that of reason to instinct, "s'il est vrai que l'instinct soit le mobile de nos actions et que la raison en soit le guide."⁴ A writer cannot show much taste in his work if he does not have talent, nor is it possible for talent to exist in its highest form without taste. La Harpe protests against those "qui s'efforcent de persuader que les préceptes du bon sens et du goût intimident, énervent, rétrécissent le génie."⁵

The term sensibilité, which La Harpe employs very frequently, is also one which he accuses his contemporaries of misusing: "On en abuse avec une si ridicule profusion qu'il faut aujourd'hui qu'une personne sensée prenne bien garde où elle place ce mot, si elle ne veut pas tomber dans le ridicule à la mode."⁶ La Harpe attempts to define his use of the word. La sensibilité needed by the writer is both a readiness to receive impressions and the ability to convey them to others: "... c'est celle [cette sensibilité] qui ne résistait point à l'impression des objets, les rend comme elle les a reçus ... ; qui gardant des traces fidèles de ce qu'elle a éprouvé, se trouve toujours d'accord avec ce qu'ont éprouvé les autres, et leur raconte leurs sensations."⁷ The

¹L., XIII, 47; cf. Voltaire, OEuvres, XVIII, 554.

²L., IV, 351; cf. ibid., VI, 425; Diderot, "Génie," Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers (Paris, 1751-1765), VII, 582-84.

³L., I, 26.

⁴OE., IV, 123.

⁵L., I, 28.

⁶Ibid., p. 55.

⁷OE., IV, 90; cf. Boileau, Art poétique, canto III.

writer who desires to move others can do so only if he finds within himself

Ce feu pur, émané de la Divinité,
Le plus beau de ses dons, la sensibilité.¹

A poet is able to touch the hearts of others only because he himself has experienced the emotions he depicts:

Toujours les grandes passions
Laissent des traits de feu dont le talent s'éclaire;
Le génie est nourri de ces émotions.
Des chagrins et des maux il se fait des richesses;
Il trouve encor la gloire en traçant ses faiblesses;
Il s'instruit par les pleurs et par les souvenirs,
Et souvent ses tourments préparent nos plaisirs.²

In these lines La Harpe gives to the personal suffering of the poet almost the same rôle as that accorded to it by the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century.

The superior writer is thus, in the mind of La Harpe, not an "irregularly great" genius who possesses a mysterious power called "creative imagination."³ He is rather a man of taste and learning who has the gift of expressing his thought in terms of images and can arouse in his readers emotions similar to those which la sensibilité has led him to experience in his own heart.

The preceding survey shows that La Harpe's general literary principles are similar, in the main, to those of the seventeenth century. He conceives of the art of writing as the product of reason and experience. The so-called rules are aids for writers rather than absolute standards by which the literary work is to be judged. They are worthy of respect because they have been universally accepted by la raison. They are not, however, to be followed blindly. The first law of art is to please, and la raison which dictates the rules will also show the writer when he may safely depart from them. This insistence upon reason as the basis of the rules is in accord with the attitude of the age of Louis XIV. Similarly La Harpe continues the traditional views of French classicism concerning the importance of la vraisemblance and les bienséances. He likewise insists that the author should select his material with care and should depict only "une nature choisie."

These seventeenth-century principles undergo, however, certain modifications typical of the eighteenth century and

¹OE., III, 329.

²Ibid., p. 330.

³Cf. Bond, "Theories of Imagination," pp. 139-41.

particularly of the neo-classicism of Voltaire. This is shown especially by a shift in emphasis through which le goût is accorded a position of the highest importance and by the great attention given to external form and details of expression. He upholds the style noble and the conventional verse form in tragedy, while accepting the dramatic innovations of Voltaire. Some reflection of pre-Romantic trends may be found, especially in the repeated references to la sensibilité, his attitude toward le merveilleux, and occasional idealization of primitive life, but this element remains decidedly subordinated to the classical and neo-classical aspects of his criticism.

The Socio-Historical Approach in La Harpe's Criticism

In the consideration of La Harpe's theories concerning critical approach, it has been noted that he mentions fairly often the necessity of taking into consideration the connection between the literary work and the milieu in which it was produced.¹ In thus recognizing this connection La Harpe was hardly an innovator. Early in the eighteenth century Dubos had emphasized the inter-relation between physical environment and the work of art. Voltaire, particularly in the Essai sur les mœurs and the Siècle de Louis XIV had carried forward together his account of political development and cultural history. Among the critics of La Harpe's own generation, Grimm and Marmontel appear to have been aware of these rapports. La Harpe himself, when he refers to the necessity of taking these connections into account, does it with the air of stating a principle that is fairly generally accepted.²

To judge individual works of arts in the light of the mœurs which produced them was a more difficult matter than to make general statements on the subject. Throughout La Harpe's literary judgments, however, one may note instances in which he attempts to apply the socio-historical principle. When writing of Homer, he states that the gods and heroes of the Greek epics should be judged against the background of ancient times. Primitive simplicity in les mœurs, physical courage in the heroes, and the attribution of human passions to the gods are elements of

¹Cf. supra, pp. 6-7, 12, 13, 21.

²L., II, 140-41; cf. supra, p. 6.

Greek life that are also found in the Iliad.¹ The Odyssey is placed in its setting, not only in time but also in place.² The Greek plays are connected with the conditions under which they were given. Since the method of representation and the audience were different from those of the moderns, the plays themselves cannot be the same.³ To judge Sophocles, for example, we must place ourselves in the position of the original audience.⁴ The Pindaric ode is more difficult for us than for the Athenians because it possessed a religious significance for them which we cannot understand.⁵ The difference in the oratorical styles of Demosthenes and Cicero is due in large part to the difference in the character of the Athenian and Roman audience.⁶

This socio-historical approach is much less prominent in La Harpe's treatment of Latin literature, which he considers as largely imitative. He gives evidence of this approach in the case of only a few Latin authors, and there is probably little in his statements that would appear novel to readers of his own day. He notes that if Terence occasionally shocks our taste, it is because of that "*disparité des mœurs*" which he holds should never be lost sight of in judging drama.⁷ Cicero must be considered in relation to his audience, and the lyric poets in connection with the Roman conception of love.⁸

In his summary of the Middle Ages, La Harpe points out the relation between disturbed social conditions and a corresponding lack of development in the realm of the arts.⁹ He explains what he considers the rudeness of the mystères by the ignorance of the audience.¹⁰ The Renaissance, on the other hand, is presented as a time of both political and cultural advancement.¹¹ The discussion of sixteenth-century French literature, however, contains

¹L., I, 186, 198-99, 203-4.

²Ibid., pp. 233, 241; cf. E. Egger, L'Hellénisme en France (Paris, 1869), II, 284-85.

³L., I, 293-95; cf. Egger, op. cit., II, 318.

⁴L., I, 337, 347.

⁵Ibid., p. 142.

⁶Ibid., III, 164, 169, 258-68.

⁷Ibid., II, 130.

⁸Ibid., III, 116, 265; II, 247-49.

⁹Ibid., IV, 32; V, 18.

¹⁰Ibid., II, 99; V, 162.

¹¹Ibid., V, 37.

little to suggest a socio-historical approach. In the first half of the seventeenth century La Harpe notes the influence of the Hôtel de Rambouillet upon society and in turn upon literature.¹ What he considers to be the superiority of the French over the ancients on the stage is held to be due to changed social conditions which provide an educated audience and, by giving women a higher position, enrich the love theme as a subject for the dramatist.² Eighteenth-century France is compared with post-Augustan Rome. Various forces combine to make it a period in which belles-lettres enter a period of decadence.³ The spirit of the age is reflected in the works produced--on the one hand leading to the development of la philosophie and on the other to a multiplicity of minor poets and dramatists who represent the characteristic trait of the age, la vanité.⁴

When discussing the literature of modern foreign countries, La Harpe makes an attempt to give some explanation of the political and social conditions which have advanced or retarded the progress of the arts. The civil wars of England delayed her cultural development.⁵ The glory of the Age of the Medici in Italy and the production of her greatest masterpieces go hand in hand.⁶ The critic likewise gives attention to analysing the character of the people and to pointing out how this is reflected in the national literature. The mysticism of the Germans turns them to speculative philosophy.⁷ The melancholy and independent spirit of the English is reflected in poetry and the literature of ideas.⁸ Spanish drama is explained, La Harpe holds, largely by the social customs which give an important place to religion, gallantry, and jealousy and at the same time demand a dignified exterior.⁹ In speaking of Spain, La Harpe likewise points out the relation between the

¹Ibid., p. 59.

²Ibid., I, 80; VI, 93; XII, 148.

³Ibid., I, 13; cf. Voltaire, OEuvres, XIV, 552-54 and passim.

⁴L., I, 13-14; C.L., II, 125; V, 13, 140.

⁵L., V, 27.

⁶Ibid., p. 37.

⁷Ibid., III, 413-14; IV, 245; XIV, 402; Mercure, July 6, 1793, p. 5. Cf. Mme de Staël, OEuvres complètes (Paris: Didot, 1871), I, 273; II, 5-9.

⁸L., VI, 86; VII, 488; XIII, 362-63; OE., XV, 10-11.

⁹L., VII, 268; XII, 146-47.

romances of chivalry and feudal customs.¹

It appears that the change in La Harpe's religious views after 1794 tended to broaden his conception of literature. In his discussion of Biblical poetry he shows a greater interest than formerly in the relation between literature and its environment.² While in the earlier period he allowed some place for the Christian marvelous, in his last years he greatly enlarged the field allotted to it.³ Some of his remarks concerning the relation between art and religion show parallels with Chateaubriand and the Génie du Christianisme.⁴

The evidences of socio-historical approach cited above appear sufficient to show that La Harpe keeps this principle fairly well in mind in much of his criticism, although he does not possess a very large fund of historical knowledge from which to draw. It should be noted, however, that this realization of the relation between art and its milieu does not lead him to a genuine relativity of taste in practice, although occasional statements tend to indicate that at times he accepted this relativity in theory. He is temperamentally unfitted to transport himself imaginatively to the past and feel at home there. He holds as a general principle that the critic should free himself from what is merely local in the literary taste of his time and judge works of art on the basis of universality. But like many other critics, he too often identifies the universal with the taste of his age or with his own personal likes and antipathies. An indication of this is found in the frequency of the adjectives grossier and barbare applied to works not in accord with eighteenth-century French taste.

If, therefore, Brunetière's statement that criticism became "historique enfin avec La Harpe" is interpreted as referring to the connection between literature and les mœurs, it may not

¹Ibid., V, 56; VII, 508; XIV, 250, 290-91.

²Ibid., II, 271; V, 63; OE., XVI, 14.

³L., I, 182-83; OE., III, 7-170; V, 673; VIII, 386, 55, 585.

⁴L., II, 286, 295; V, 67; OE., XVI, 14. Cf. Chateaubriand, Le Génie du Christianisme (Paris: Migneret, 1802), II, 245, 222; III, 140-50.

be wholly accepted.¹ Although La Harpe advocates a modified socio-historical approach in principle and applies it in part of his criticism, it appears that in this he was not an isolated figure but was following a trend of his century.² An examination of the passage from which Brunetière's statement is taken shows, however, that he thinking not so much of the rapports between society and literature as of the general conception embodied in the Lycée. La Harpe is said to be the author "qui s'est avisé le premier de réduire en un corps toute l'histoire de la littérature, et de faire marcher du même pas l'histoire et l'appréciation des oeuvres."³ Brunetière concedes that the plan is incompletely carried out, that the Lycée is badly proportioned, and that chronology is at times violated. Nevertheless La Harpe has opened the way to subsequent critics: "Mais il n'en doit pas moins garder l'honneur d'avoir, le premier, considéré la littérature dans la totalité de sa suite; de l'avoir ainsi traitée pour elle-même, en elle-même, comme capable de se suffire; d'avoir enfin, par là, frayé les voies à une critique plus large et autre que la sienne."⁴ The same position is accorded to the Lycée by Faguet, who states that La Harpe is the first "qui ait eu l'idée d'une histoire littéraire soutenue par des principes directeurs et des idées générales et une méthode sensiblement uniforme."⁵

It would be an exaggeration to interpret this to mean that La Harpe was the first to conceive the project of writing a history of literature. The Benedictines of Saint-Maur began their Histoire littéraire de la France in the early part of the eighteenth century, and in their preface they state that two sixteenth-century writers had undertaken a somewhat similar project.⁶ They state,

¹Brunetière, Evolution de la critique, p. 164.

²Cf. supra, p. 27.

³Brunetière, Evolution de la critique, p. 162. Cf. supra, p. 6, for La Harpe's own statement.

⁴Brunetière, Evolution de la critique, p. 163.

⁵E. Faguet, "La Harpe," Revue des cours et conférences, 1904-1905 (1ère série), p. 195.

⁶These sixteenth-century predecessors are identified in a note as La Croix du Maine and Duverdier. Mention is also made of the unfinished work of Nicéron, Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des hommes illustres de la république des lettres (1727-1745).

however, that no literary history of France has been completed. Their own erudite undertaking, which has not progressed beyond the Middle Ages, has little in common with La Harpe's survey of ancient and modern literature. A search of bibliographies, catalogues, and contemporary periodicals has failed to reveal any eighteenth-century French work preceding the Lycée and covering the same ground.

It would appear that La Harpe's work was not so much the result of an original idea conceived by the author as of the situation in which he was placed. The Lycée was founded to meet the demand of the public for a wider diffusion of knowledge. The publication of La Harpe's lectures followed as a natural result of their popularity. If La Harpe had not produced a cours de littérature at that particular time, probably someone else would have done so. These considerations, however, do not detract from the historical importance of the Lycée, which appears to represent for the general reading public the first approximately complete critical presentation in French of ancient and modern literature arranged, in the main, on a chronological basis.

